

The Chinese Sisters Soong Came to Wesleyan

The story of the Chinese family of Soong seems too fantastic to be true. Little more than fifty years ago the family was unknown in China; today not only all China but intelligent people everywhere have heard of the Soongs. In a country notorious for its joy over sons and its tears of disappointment over daughters, the three Soong girls have become more prominent than any of their brothers. Above the soil where many Chinese women used to hobble on bound feet, the youngest sister flies directing the nation's fleet of airplanes. In the country where a generation ago no woman dared to raise her voice outside the privacy of her room, the Soong daughters are known as "the mouthpieces of China", and speak over the radio not only to their own people but to the world.

Each of the sisters spent the greater part of five years at Wesleyan. E-ling, who is Madame H. H. Kung, wife of the aristocratic premier and financial leader of China, entered the sub-freshman class and graduated in the class of 1909. Chung-ling, now Madame Sun Yat-sen, widow of the beloved leader of the Chinese revolution and first president of the republic, came as sub-freshman in 1908 and graduated in 1913. May-ling, now Madame Chiang Kai-shek, generalissimo of China, although she was for most of the time between 1908 and 1913 at Wesleyan, was a college student only one year, 1912-13. Before that time she was privately tutored by Margie Burks, who was on the Wesleyan faculty, for May-ling was only ten years old when she came to Macon from China (and that is a story in itself!)

Why the Soongs Came to Wesleyan

Charles Jones Soong, originally from the remote island of Hainan, shipped to the United States as a cabin boy in the 1880's and, helped by General Julian S. Carr of Durham, N. C., entered Trinity College (now Duke University), and in 1885 received a theological certificate from Vanderbilt University. It is possible that he had heard of Wesleyan when he was in America, as one of the few colleges of the south which continued uninterrupted throughout the Civil War. Or perhaps he heard of it through American missionaries, for after his return to China he helped to found the Chinese Y. M. C. A., and printed Bibles in Chinese. He married a Miss Ni of Shanghai, a pillar of the Christian community there, described by George Sokolsky, long a journalist in China, as "a strong, effective woman of unusual charm and perspicacity".

At any rate, in 1904 he sent his oldest daughter, E-ling, to Georgia in the care of the Rev. James W. Burke, Methodist missionary who was returning on furlough. E-ling was only 14 years old at the time, and her first experience in the



E-ling Soong as a college freshman (picture taken from the Wesleyan annual of 1906)

new country was a particularly tragic one. The wife of the missionary became critically ill of typhoid fever on board the ship, and the family disembarked on an island in the Pacific, where she died. The rest of the party including E-ling, was detained in quarantine for some weeks in San Francisco.

How forlorn the little girl must have been, and how she must have longed to return on the ship as it made the trip back to the home she would not see again for five years! E-ling has even today, in spite of her position of leadership which makes her take the initiative in many important matters, a certain shyness of manner, and when she entered the sub-freshman class, she must have suffered agonies of homesickness and timidity. But no one ever heard her speak of it, and never, as far as anyone knows, did she consider as remotely possible the idea of going home without her college degree.

The Oldest Soong Sister at Wesleyan

Judge DuPont Guerrey was president of Wesleyan when E-ling came, and her father had carried on so long a correspondence, with him about plans for the daughter's education that Judge Guerrey felt as if he went to meet the daughter of an old friend when she arrived. Mrs. Guerrey took the little girl into her own household, for it was several weeks before the opening of college, and E-ling formed an attachment for the Guerreys which has lasted through all the years since. In 1906, when E-ling's uncle was sent to America as a member of the Chinese imperial commission, Mrs. Guerrey chaperoned the girl on a trip to Washington to see him. A few years after

E-ling's graduation, Judge Guerrey died. In 1932, when she visited Macon, she went with Mrs. Guerrey to his grave. She carried an armful of roses and knelt to place them near his stone, speaking as she did so of her devotion to him. Later she established at Wesleyan college a scholarship named in his memory.

E-ling was a serious student, quiet and reserved, but as evidence of the fact that she, too, enjoyed the nonsense and hilarity of college life there is an old program of the class-day exercises in 1909 on which the feature was a play "The Vicissitudes of College Life," dramatized from the Betty Wales books by three seniors, one of them Miss E-ling Soong. The program of her graduation recital is still treasured at the college. On it she read an original arrangement of "Madame Butterfly." While rehearsing for this program, E-ling wrote to her father for some silk to make her costume. He sent her forty yards of lovely rose-colored brocade!

The class prophecy of 1909, painting as such schoolgirl fantasies do, the most improbable futures for most of the class, has a statement about E-ling which is almost uncanny. Pretending to quote from a newspaper of some twenty years later, the class prophet read: "Look at that flaming headline on the front page! Greatest reforms in China that the world has ever heard of. The wife of the leader is the real power behind the throne. As a result of her sagacity, China has made great strides. We can now understand why E-ling felt so insulted once when a Wesleyan professor told her she had become a fine American citizen."

And indeed Charles Soong, wise father that he was, sent his daughters to get all that they could of American education, yet never let them forget that they were Chinese, and that their first allegiance was to their native land. One of the Wesleyan teachers, Mrs. Margaret Hall Hazard, recalls: "Mr. Soong kept his daughters in close touch with affairs in China and directed their reading in Chinese history and classics. He told them of all the developments in their country."

One of E-ling's classmates says, "All three of the girls were born diplomats. They were informed on current topics when the rest of us were not even interested. They could always be relied upon to get a teacher off the subject when we did not know the lesson well."

Two More Soongs Arrive in 1908

In 1908, when E-ling was a junior, the family planned to send Chung-ling, the second sister, to Wesleyan. Ten-year-old May-ling, with that calm disregard for obstacles that has characterized her actions since, with something of the determination that made her march up to her husband's kidnapers recently and demand



Chung-ling Soong in academic gown at Wesleyan in 1913

his release (and get it!), announced that she wanted to come to America, too.

In vain they argued that she was too young and promised that she should go as soon as she was 14. She would have none of it. She reminded them of a promise made to her during a serious illness, that if she would submit to treatment she might have anything she wished. She wanted to come to America, and that was all she wanted, so to America she came.

She arrived with Chung-ling in 1908, an eager alert little person, slightly inclined to be chubby and undoubtedly inclined to be saucy. Little she cared for the fact that she was breaking a college precedent by arriving years too soon, and she wrote her name under the promise to obey the rules and regulations "as long as I remain a pupil in the institution" as firmly as anybody. She was allowed to remain with her sisters, but was not considered a bona fide "pupil of the institution" during the years of private tutelage.

Mrs. M. M. Burks, mother of May-ling's teacher, was professor of English at Wesleyan at the time, and she assumed the role of foster mother to the little girl. Not only did Mrs. Burks guide May-ling's education, discipline her when she needed it, shop with her for shoes and hats and make her dresses, but she loved her dearly and saw in her the potential leader of China. It is years since Mrs. Burks was at Wesleyan, but her influence still so lingers that the students of today feel the same awe at the mention of her name that the girls of May-ling's day felt. Graduates coming back for reunions used to ask as soon as their feet touched the threshold, "where's Mrs. Burks?" as one asks "Where's mother?" on coming home. It is hard to determine, in a lifetime of multiple influences, what causes one to hold to this principle or that, but it is

certain that much of May-ling's idealism today is reminiscent of Mrs. Burks' teachings. Old-fashioned as they seemed, even in 1908, Mrs. Burks' often-repeated statements about nobility, and singleness of purpose, and duty to one's less fortunate brothers were sound, and are identical with many of those May-ling has made to the world in connection with China's New Life Movement.

Chung-ling was gentle and thoughtful, more quiet than either of her sisters. Writers in recent years have almost invariably called her beautiful. Photographs of her show a sensitive, almost brooding face which, touched by the intense loyalty she felt for the revolution and its leader, took on an exquisite dignity and stateliness.

Even as a student she was an ardent revolutionist and a warm admirer of her father's friend, Sun Yat-sen. Her admiration for him must have been kindled and fanned by her father's written praise of him. Her roommates told of her climbing on a chair to pull down the Chinese dragon from the wall when her father sent her the new flag of the republic, and of her dramatic exclamation as she threw the old banner on the floor and stamped on it.

"Down with the dragon! Up with the flag of the republic!"

During her junior year at college the student magazine carried her article, "The Greatest Event of the Twentieth Century," an account of the Chinese revolution.

"Five months ago," she wrote, "our wildest dream could not have been for a republic. It is a most glorious achievement. It means the emancipation of 400,000,000 souls from the thralldom of absolute monarchy under whose rule 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' have been denied."

After her graduation the following year she wrote to one of her teachers, "I shall soon be on my way home. I am taking a box of California fruits to Dr. Sun from his admirers here, and I am also the proud bearer of a private letter to him."

The revolutionary movement in which her hopes had been so buoyant was already meeting with grave difficulties, and Chung-ling's father, with Sun Yat-sen, was in exile in Japan. Joining the lonely and disillusioned group, she brought her youthful optimism and worshipful faith to the leader of the revolution at a time when he needed it most. It is for this, and for her unfailing loyalty to his principles as his wife and as his widow, that the Chinese people revere her today.

She wrote to her classmate, Annie (Gantt) Anderson, of her wedding: "It was the simplest possible, for we both hate surplus ceremonies and the like. I am happy and try to help my husband as much as possible with his English correspondence. My French is greatly improved

and I am now able to read French papers and translate by sight easily. So you see marriage for me is like going to school except that there are no 'exams' to trouble me."

In another letter there is evidence of her innate modesty: "You know how I dread publicity! But since my marriage I have had to participate in many affairs which I'd otherwise escape. The Chinese are not like Europeans. They always thrust greatness and honor, not upon those who deserve them, but upon the timid. I see many people every day; in fact I'm simply pulled out of my shell by circumstances. I was dumbfounded at some of the reports that have been manufactured about me in Macon. For instance, I learned that I was once a spy of the revolutionists before my marriage. And the various exciting and thrilling incidents that I have gone through must have been my nightmares, though I'm sure I never told about them!"

The reactions of the Soong sisters as students were usually American, but sometimes surprisingly oriental. Their clothes were made in American fashion, but quite often were of Chinese materials. There is a story about Chung-ling which shows how she, perhaps more than either of the others, clung to certain attitudes from old China. At the time of her graduation, her academic gown, through some error, did not arrive according to schedule. She went to Mrs. White, the matron, in distress.

"Never mind," said Mrs. White, "you may wear my son's gown. He has left it with me for safekeeping."

"Oh, no!" cried Chung-ling in dismay. "I could not wear a **man's** gown!"

But she smothered this scruple and wore it. She wished always to be as much as possible like her American



May-ling Soong, ten years old, came to America with her older sisters and lived at Wesleyan.

friends. She picked up little slang and colloquial expressions from them, though not as readily as May-ling did.

"What of the old maids in our class?" she wrote soon after leaving college. "What are they doing—'waiting' or 'baiting'?"

When she describes her country as she found it on her return and her new home in Shanghai, her pride is in the fact that they are so little different from American ones.

"Our life here is exactly like yours," she writes. "We live and dress a la European, even to the decoration of the rooms, so you can sometimes picture me, not as a friend in far-away China, soaked in oriental atmosphere, but as one of your American friends in the busy city. For Shanghai is really very modern, more so than Atlanta in many ways. Our house is nice and big, and has all the modern conveniences. There are plenty of bedrooms and tubs and lavatories, so you must come for a visit some time."

While the others took on American ways and tricks of speech with somewhat of an effort, May-ling adopted them almost unconsciously. Only one story about her shows that it may have been difficult sometimes for her, and that has to do with the first days after her arrival. Schoolmates, going to her room in the

evening, once or twice entered in time to catch a glimpse of a little figure in Chinese costume disappearing into the closet. More often, however, they were not admitted at all until May-ling had had time to change into her American clothes. While she occasionally permitted herself the small weakness of putting on the native dress that made her feel at home in her strange room, she would not let herself be seen in it. "While in Rome, do as the Romans do" was certainly her motto.

Schoolmates and Teachers Recall the Chinese Sisters

Wesleyan teachers recall evidences of unusual maturity in the girls as students. E-ling once wrote a very fine paper warning the church of the danger of exposing to Chinese philosophies any missionary not deeply grounded in his faith and broadly educated enough to be able to defend it against the subtle powers of Chinese argument. Chung-ling's student writings gave promise of the author of numerous powerful articles which have appeared in magazines in recent years.

May-ling is remembered at Wesleyan as a child, but as a precocious child. She was intensely alive and into mischief every minute, for which she could usually get herself forgiven by her quick and clever tongue. Once, in the days when rouge and lipstick were considered somehow



Mrs. M. M. Burks Wesleyan teacher who "mothered" May-ling as a little girl.

shameful, one of the older girls said accusingly to her, "Why, May-ling I believe your face is painted!"

"Yes," came the quick answer. "China-painted."

Dr. W. N. Ainsworth had taken Judge Guerry's place as president of the college when May-ling was in the dormitory, and his little daughter, Eloise, was about May-ling's age. They were inseparable friends and the pets of the entire college household. With them often played a third child, Marjorie Gugel (now Mrs. Homer Key), niece of one of the college officials, May-ling, beginning the study of Latin, coined a name for the trio, "the tri-puellate."

The tri-puellate raced through the corridors of the five-story main building, found out something about everybody's business and had a finger in everybody's pie. May-ling was allowed to leave her studies sometimes and run around the campus in the middle of her French lesson, because she insisted it was necessary. Years later she wrote, "When I come back to America I shall not feel that I have seen it at all unless I visit Wesleyan and perhaps go to sleep in the same seats in the same classrooms as I did when I was a little girl." It sounds like all running and sleeping, but there must have been some studying, too, for she entered Wellesley with a strong foundation in languages and history and won several scholarships for her excellent work.

Not always did the tri-puellate live in harmony and happiness. Sometimes they quarreled hotly, and it was May-ling who could get the angriest. Mrs. Ainsworth, Eloise's mother, once lectured May-ling on the weakness of losing one's temper and the beauty of forgiveness.

"Aren't you ashamed," she admonished, "to storm about like this?"

The reply came back quick as a flash and accompanied by a sly twinkle in the



A small group of the student body of 1913
(This picture appeared in the magazine LIFE, for August, 1937)
Left to right, front row: May-ling Soong, Harriet Robeson, Floye Powell.
Back row: Christine Broome, Edwina Teasley, Lollie Belle Earnest, Lida Franklin, Jamie Bachman.



Madame H. H. Kung
(E-ling Soong)

dark eyes. "Mrs. Ainsworth, I rather enjoy it!"

Years later, when Bishop and Mrs. Ainsworth were guests of the Chiangs at the president's home in Nanking, May-ling threw her arms about the older woman's neck with the same whole-souled impulsiveness she had as a child and exclaimed, "Oh, Mrs. Ainsworth, you may have thought that all the things you said to Eloise and me were not sinking in, but I assure you I have them all here in my heart now."

May-ling was sergeant-at-arms of her class as a freshman. She carried the banner and led the cheering, which seems altogether appropriate for the little girl who grew up to become the leader of the New Life Movement in her country. Her picture appears in the college annual as a member of the tennis club and of the Billy Crows, whatever that may have been. No doubt May-ling would not remember its purpose herself, nor would any of the other girls. According to the annual, it had something to do with meetings at the Crow's Nest; its favorite food was liquorice and its favorite flower the black tulip.

During the summers the three Soong girls visited college chums or friends of their father's in North Carolina. Sometimes they went to some northern city to be near their brothers who were studying in universities there, and continued their work under private tutors. From one of these summers comes the incident about May-ling that her Georgia friends treasure most, told often to appreciative listeners by Mrs. Burks.

A tutor, hearing her history lesson, told May-ling to describe Sherman's march through Georgia. To his astonishment the tempestuous little Georgian-by-adoption answered, "Pardon me, I am a south-

erner, and that subject is very painful to me. May I omit it?"

The Alumnae Magazine of Wellesley College, where May-ling completed her college work after leaving Wesleyan, said of her in 1938:

"She wrote and spoke beautiful, idiomatic English with a flavor which was southern rather than oriental. It is told that, not liking Wellesley on her first day, she walked into the office of the late Edith Souther Tufts, then Dean of Residence, and said, 'Well, I reckon I shan't stay 'round here much longer'."

Of her life after Wesleyan, May-ling's southern friends have had only brief glimpses through correspondence. One Wesleyan teacher, who was Miss Margaret Hall when May-ling was on the campus and is today Mrs. F. H. Hazard of Bloomfield, N. J., had tea at Wellesley once with May-ling, "Miss Margie", and Mrs. Burks, and wrote of her:

"She was at that time a graceful, charming young woman with easy manners, a delightful hostess and popular with her college mates. She had been in America so long that some of her friends felt a great deal of apprehension about her return to China, fearing that she would not be happy in her own land. But history has shown that their fears were not well grounded. She returned to China and plunged into Y. W. C. A. work in order to bring to Chinese girls some of the fruits of her American education. A year or two later Mrs. Burks shared with me some very fine papers she had written on Chinese social questions."

Just before her graduation from Wellesley, May-ling wrote to her Wesleyan history teacher, Professor J. W. W. Daniel, giving a lengthy account of herself, "since you cannot come up to see me



Madame Chiang Kai-Shek
(May-ling Soong)



Madame Sun Yat Sen
(Chung-ling Soong)

made a bachelor" and a description of her Wellesley teacher of history. There is this characteristic comment. "She does not care for dry facts; she stresses 'thought questions'." Also characteristic was this statement, after praise of a book written by this Wellesley teacher: "You are on the library committee at Wesleyan, aren't you? I think this is a book Wesleyan should have, if you will pardon this unsolicited information on my part."

Chung-ling wrote to a classmate on Jan. 10, 1917: "Just think, little May-ling will graduate this June and return to China in July. How time flies! She is a popular lassie and enjoys her college life immensely."

By 1918, then, they were all back in their own country, and how that country has needed their presence in the years that have followed! Only E-ling has returned to Wesleyan, and even that brief visit in 1932 was overshadowed by an almost morbid fear of publicity. It was about the time of the Manchurian trouble.

"I long to tread once more the familiar grounds and to see the faces of those I have loved. I shall make a desperate effort to come back," she wrote. She was afraid that even at the last minute she might find it too much to face the possible notoriety. But we promised her that no trumpets would be sounded and were able, with the co-operation of friends who could understand her need for a little peace and privacy, to keep that promise. Her classmates were notified and came from far and wide to join her at Wesleyan. For two whole days she saw none except familiar faces and was able to lay down for a few hours her country's burdens. Those were probably the last care-free hours she has had from that day to this.